

3-1-2016

13. Oral Presentations

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Recommended Citation

McMurray, David and Race, Cassandra, "13. Oral Presentations" (2016). *Sexy Technical Communications*. 13.
<http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/oertechcomm/13>

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Oral Presentations

A common assignment in technical writing courses—not to mention in the workplace—is to prepare and deliver an oral presentation, a task most of us would be happy to avoid. However, while employers look for coursework and experience in preparing written documents, they also look for experience in oral presentations as well. Look back at the first chapter. Remember how important interpersonal communication skills are in the workplace.

The following was written for a standard face-to-face classroom setting. If you are taking the online version of Sexy Technical Writing, oral reports can be sent in as "scripts," or audio versions can be transmitted live or recorded. The learning management system, Desire2Learn, offers MediaSpace as a tool for students to use for creating presentations, and both the drop box and the discussion forum provide means to upload audio and video. In any case, students may evaluate each other's oral reports by filling out a form like the one provided at the end of this chapter or responding through the discussion board.

If you can believe the research, most people would rather have root canal surgery without novocaine than stand up in front of a group and speak. It truly is one of the great stressors. But with some help from the resources that follow, you can be a champion presenter.

When you finish this chapter, you should be able to plan and prepare a talk or presentation, deliver the presentation, create presentation materials that reflect standards of effective presentation, and evaluate presentations delivered by others, including classmates.

For additional information on oral presentations and public speaking in general, see:

- [Effective Presentations](#). Part of an online tutorial series provided by Kansas University Medical Center. This section has many resources that will be helpful to you.

Topic and Situation for the Oral Presentation

For the oral report in a technical writing course, imagine that you are formally handing over your final *written* report to the people with whom you set up the hypothetical contract or agreement. For example, imagine that you had contracted with a software company to write its user guide. Once you had completed it, you'd have a meeting with chief officers to formally deliver the guide. You'd spend some time orienting them to the guide, showing them how it is organized and written, and discussing some of its highlights. Your goal is to get them acquainted with the guide and to prompt them for any concerns or questions. (Your class will gladly pretend to be whomever you tell them to be during your talk.)

As you can see, you shouldn't have to do any research to prepare for this assignment—just plan the details of your talk and get at least one visual ready. If you have a report topic that you'd prefer not to present orally, discuss other possibilities with your instructor. Here are some brainstorming possibilities in case you want to present something else:

- **Purpose:** One way to find a topic is to think about the purpose of your talk. Is it to instruct (for example, to explain how to run a text editing program on a computer), to persuade (to vote for or against a certain technically oriented bond issue), or simply to inform (to report on citizen participation in the new recycling program).
 - *Informative purpose:* An oral report can be primarily informative. For example, as a member of a committee involved in a project to relocate the plant, your job might be to give an oral report on the condition of the building and grounds at one of the sites proposed for purchase. Or, you might be required to go before the city council and report on the success of the new city-sponsored recycling project.
 - *Instructional purpose:* An oral report can be instructional. Your task might be to train new employees to use certain equipment or to perform certain routine tasks.
 - *Persuasive purpose:* An oral report can be persuasive. You might want to convince members of local civic organizations to support a city-wide recycling program. You might appear before city council to persuade its members to reserve certain city-owned lands for park areas, softball and baseball parks, or community gardens.
 - **Topics:** You can start by thinking of a technical subject, for example, solar panels, microprocessors, drip irrigation, or laser surgery. For your oral report, think of a subject you'd be interested in talking about, but find a reason why an audience would want to hear your oral report.
 - **Place or situation:** You can find topics for oral reports or make more detailed plans for them by thinking about the place or the situation in which your oral report might naturally be given: at a neighborhood association? at the parent–teachers' association meeting? at a church meeting? at the gardening club? at a city council meeting? at a meeting of the board of directors or high-level executives of a company? Thinking about an oral report this way makes you focus on the audience, their reasons for listening to you, and their interests and background. As in all technical writing situations, identifying and understanding your audience is of the utmost importance.
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Contents and Requirements for the Oral Presentation

The focus for your oral presentation is clear, understandable presentation; well-organized, well-planned, well-timed discussion. You don't need to be Mr. or Ms. Slick-Operator—just present the essentials of what you have to say in a calm, organized, well-planned manner.

When you give your oral presentation, we'll all be listening for the same things. Use the following as a requirements list, as a way of focusing your preparations:

- Plan to explain to the class what the situation of your oral report is, who you are, and who they should imagine they are. Make sure that there is a clean break between this brief explanation and the beginning of your actual oral report.
- Make sure your oral report lasts no longer than the time allotted. Your instructor will work out some signals to indicate when the mark is approaching, has arrived, or has passed.
- Pay special attention to the introduction to your talk: Here's where you tell your audience what you are going to tell them.
 - Indicate the *purpose* of your oral report
 - give an *overview* of its contents
 - find some way to *interest* the audience.
- Use at least one visual—preferably slides using presentation software (such as Powerpoint) or transparencies for the overhead projector. Flip charts and objects for display are okay. But avoid scribbling stuff on the chalkboard or whiteboard or relying strictly on handouts.
- Make sure you discuss key elements of your visuals. Don't just throw them up there and ignore them. Point out things about them; explain them to the audience.
- Plan to explain any technical aspect of your topic clearly and understandably. Don't race through complex, technical stuff—slow down and explain it carefully so that we understand it.
- Use "verbal headings"—by now, you've gotten used to using headings in your written work. There is a corollary in oral reports. With these, you give your audience a very clear signal you are moving from one topic or part of your talk to the next. Your presentation visual can signal your headings.
- Plan your report in advance and practice it so that it is organized. Make sure that listeners know what you are talking about and why, which part of the talk you are in, and what's coming next. Overviews and verbal headings greatly contribute to this sense of organization.
- End with a real conclusion. People sometimes forget to plan how to end an oral report and end by just trailing off into a mumble. Remember that in conclusions, you can:
 - *summarize* (go back over high points of what you've discussed)
 - *conclude* (state some logical conclusion based on what you have presented)
 - provide some *last thought* (end with some final interesting point but general enough not to require elaboration)

- or some combination of these three
- And certainly, you'll want to prompt the audience for questions and concerns.
- As mentioned above, be sure your oral report is carefully timed. Some ideas on how to work within an allotted time frame are presented in the next section.

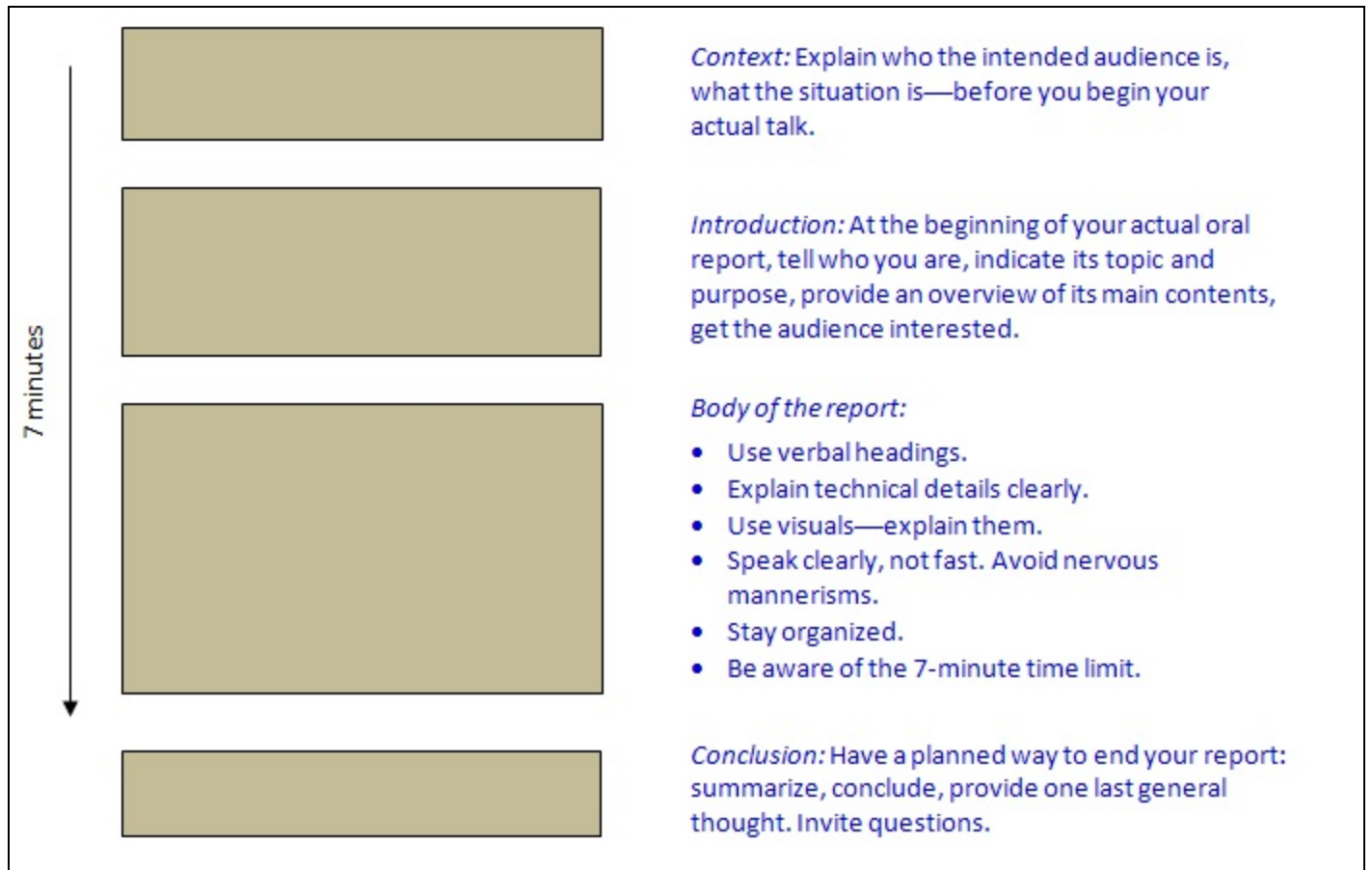


Diagram of the 7 minute oral presentation.

Preparing for the Oral Presentation

Pick the method of preparing for the talk that best suits your comfort level with public speaking and with your topic. However, plan to do ample preparation and rehearsal—some people assume that they can just jump up there and ad lib for so many minutes and be relaxed and informal. It doesn't often work that way—drawing a mental blank is the more common experience. A well delivered presentation is the result of a lot of work and a lot of practice.

Here are the obvious possibilities for preparation and delivery:

- Write a script, practice it; keep it around for quick-reference during your talk.
- Set up an outline of your talk; practice with it, bring it for reference.
- Set up cue cards, practice with them, and use them during your talk.
- Write a script and read from it.

Of course, the extemporaneous or impromptu methods are also out there for the brave and the adventurous. However, please bear in mind that up to 25 people will be listening to you—you owe them a good presentation, one that is clear, understandable, well-planned, organized, and on target with your purpose and audience.

It doesn't matter which method you use to prepare for the talk, but you want to make sure that you know your material. The head-down style of reading your report directly from a script has problems. There is little or no eye contact or interaction with the audience. The delivery tends toward a dull, boring monotone that either puts listeners off or is hard to understand. And, most of us cannot stand to have reports read to us!

For many reasons, most people get nervous when they have to give oral presentations. Being well prepared is your best defense against the nerves. Try to remember that your classmates and instructor are a very forgiving, supportive group. You don't have to be a slick entertainer—just be clear, organized, and understandable. The nerves will wear off someday, the more oral presenting you do. In the meantime, breathe deeply and enjoy.

The following is an example of an introduction to an oral presentation. Use it as a guide for planning your own.

Oral Presentation: Enhancement of the Recycling Program

Valerie and I represent the Austin Coalition for Recycling, a group that was founded in the late 1960s, partly in response to rising utility bills and partly out of a concern for the environment and its resources. High utility bills not only hurt each of us in our pocketbooks but also hurt the quality of life of our city as a whole. We are all particularly proud of what a fine city we live in and what wonderful citizen involvement there is here in a whole range of civic activities. These things make our city special and ought to be the force that enables us to make a recycling program an integral part of the city's waste management program. Backed by the City, a new powerful recycling program will contribute enormously to keeping Austin the wonderful place it is.

Valerie and I want to talk to you about how recycling works currently, how it will work once integrated with the city's waste management program, how this integration will benefit our city, and what you can do to support this plan.

Opening: establishes who they are, what they represent, and why they are here.

Attempts to build some interest and identification with the audience.

Purpose and scope: explains the purpose of the presentation and provides an overview of the topics to be covered—all in one sentence.

Introductory remarks in an oral presentation.

Delivering an Oral Presentation

When you give an oral report, focus on common problem areas such as these:

- **Timing**—Make sure you keep within the time limit. Finishing more than a minute under the time limit is also a problem. Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse until you get the timing just right.
- **Volume**—Obviously, you must be sure to speak loud enough so that all of your audience can hear you. You might find some way to practice speaking a little louder in the days before the oral presentation.
- **Pacing, speed**—Sometimes, oral presentators who are nervous talk too fast. All that adrenaline causes them to speed through their talk, making it hard for the audience to follow. In general, it helps listeners understand you better if you speak a bit more slowly and deliberately than you do in normal conversation. Slow down, take it easy, be clear...and breathe.
- **Gestures and posture**—Watch out for nervous hands flying all over the place. This too can be distracting—and a bit comical. At the same time, don't turn yourself into a mannikin. Plan to keep your hands clasped together or holding onto the podium and only occasionally making some gesture. Definitely keep your hands out of your pockets or waistband. As for posture, avoid slouching at the podium or leaning against the wall. Stand up straight, and keep your head up.
- **Verbal crutches**—Watch out for too much "uh," "you know," "okay" and other kinds of nervous verbal habits. Instead of saying "uh" or "you know" every three seconds, just don't say anything at all. In the days before your oral presentation, practice speaking without these verbal crutches. The silence that replaces them is not a bad thing—it gives listeners time to process what you are saying.

The following is an example of how topic headings can make your presentation easy for your listeners to follow.

Excerpts from an oral report

As you can see from the preceding, our fairly average-size city produces a surprisingly large **amount** of solid waste. What is the **cost** of getting rid of it? I can tell you from the start that it is not cheap....

[discussion of the costs of disposal]

... Not only are the **costs** of getting rid of our garbage high, as I have shown, but it's getting harder and harder for city officials to find areas in which to get rid of it. The **geographical problems** in disposal

Verbal headings

The first sentence refers to the topic "amount"—what the speaker has just finished talking about.

The next sentence indicates that the speaker is moving on to a new topic ("cost").

At the beginning of this next section, the first half of the first sentence refers to the previous topic—this time, it's "costs." The second half of the same sentence indicates that we are moving on to another new topic—"geographical problems in disposal."

Examples of verbal headings in an oral presentation.

Planning and Preparing Visuals for Oral Presentations

Prepare at least one visual for this report. Here are some ideas for the "medium" to use for your visuals:

- **Presentation software slides**—Projecting images ("slides") using software such as Powerpoint has become the standard, even though maligned by some. One common problem with the construction of these slides is cramming too much information on individual slides. A quick search on terms like Powerpoint presentation will enable you to read about creating these slides and designing them intelligently. Of course, the room in which you use these slides has to have a computer projector.
- **Transparencies for overhead projector**—The overhead projector used with transparencies seems to have been relegated to antiquity—but not entirely. If you have to use this method, you will design your visual on a sheet of blank paper, then photocopy it, and create a transparency of it.
- **Posterboard-size charts**—Another possibility is to get some posterboard and draw and letter what you want your audience to see. Of course, it's not easy making charts look neat and professional.
- **Handouts**—You can run off copies of what you want your listeners to see and hand

them out before or during your talk. This option is even less effective than the first two because you can't point to what you want your listeners to see and because handouts distract listeners' attention away from you. Still, for certain visual needs, handouts are the only choice. Keep in mind that if you are not well prepared, the handouts become a place for your distracted audience to doodle.

- **Objects**—If you need to demonstrate certain procedures, you may need to bring in actual physical objects. Rehearse what you are going to do with these objects; sometimes they can take up a lot more time than you expect.

Avoid just scribbling your visual on the chalkboard or whiteboard. Whatever you scribble can be neatly prepared and made into a presentation slide, transparency, or posterboard-size chart. Take some time to make your visuals look sharp and professional—do your best to ensure that they are legible to the entire audience.

As for the content of your visuals, consider these ideas:

- **Drawing or diagram of key objects**—If you describe or refer to any objects during your talk, try to get visuals of them so that you can point to different components or features.
- **Tables, charts, graphs**—If you discuss statistical data, present it in some form or table, chart, or graph. Many members of your audience may be less comfortable "hearing" such data as opposed to seeing it.
- **Outline of your talk, report, or both**—If you are at a loss for visuals to use in your oral presentation, or if your presentation is complex, have an outline of it that you can show at various points during your talk.
- **Key terms and definitions**—A good idea for visuals (especially when you can't think of any others) is to set up a two-column list of key terms you use during your oral presentation with their definitions in the second column.
- **Key concepts or points**—Similarly, you can list your key points and show them in visuals. (Outlines, key terms, and main points are all good, legitimate ways of incorporating visuals into oral presentations when you can't think of any others.)

During your actual oral report, make sure to discuss your visuals, refer to them, guide your listeners through the key points in your visuals. It's a big problem just to throw a visual up on the screen and never even refer to it.

As you prepare your visuals, look at resources that will help you. There are many rules for using PowerPoint, down to the font size and how many words to put on a single slide, but you will have to choose the style that best suits your subject and your presentation style.

The two videos that follow will provide some pointers. As you watch them, make some notes to help you remember what you learn from them. The first one is funny...**Life After Death by PowerPoint by Don McMillan, an engineer turned comedian.**



You may also have heard about the presentation skills of Steve Jobs. The video that follows is the introduction of the I-Phone...and as you watch, take notes on how Jobs sets up his talk and his visuals. Observe how he connects with the audience...and then see if you can work some of his strategies into your own presentation skills. This is a long video...you don't need to watch it all, but do take enough time to form some good impressions.



Now you are ready! Go to the exercises below as warm ups to help you start working towards that big day!

Activities and Exercises

1. Ready to get started? Think of a topic that interests you and develop an introduction to a talk about it that follows the guidelines in the chapter for writing an introduction. Try it out on a classmate. Then, take turns asking each other questions about your topic.
 2. Design 3 visuals for your topic, including a title page. Use the Styles and Themes feature in PowerPoint to create a consistent theme for a presentation.
 3. Find a YouTube video or a tutorial on line on how to make good presentations. Share it with classmates by teaching some of the main points in group discussion.
 4. In small groups, develop a list of "rules" to follow when you have to give an oral presentation...then create a class list!
 5. In a memo to your teacher (or in an online discussion forum) share some of your" best practices" ideas for getting through a presentation. Also, share some details from the most horrible presentations you've ever seen...or given...maybe you can help a classmate avoid making the the same mistakes! (I once had a friend who introduced his talk on gun control by firing a pistol loaded with blanks right beside his ear...it wasn't actually funny, but yes, yes it was...oh well!)
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Evaluation Form

[Download the evaluation form](#)